



University Social Responsibility: Exploring Policies and Practices in Flagship Universities in Africa

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Abstract

University Social Responsibility (USR) is a philosophy guiding the activity of universities that is designed to support the socio-economic development of communities. The social responsibility role is variously referred to as community engagement, civic engagement, or third mission and similar terms. This study explores the degree to which the universities studied embrace social responsibility in their mission or vision statements. The sample includes purposively selected universities from East, West, South and North Africa. Data were obtained from a content analysis of the universities' websites pertaining to university social responsibility discourse. Results indicate that most of the universities studied have references to USR but few clearly indicate their mission and have a full-fledged policy, even though many have administrative units to run USR. More research is required that examines how African universities are classifying, documenting and reporting their societal commitment as an important element of their institutional strategy.

Keywords: social responsibility, university, Africa, higher education

Introduction

Universities are no longer enclaves or elitist spaces detached from the social fabric in which they operate. They are under pressure to make themselves an integral part of their communities not just as pedagogical or scientific environments but as multipurpose institutions that serve society. A supposedly narrow focus on research and teaching has given way to a more ambitious agenda of serving societies diversely, variously called “community engagement”, “community service”, “civic engagement” or more descriptively “university social responsibility” (USR) (Stanton, 2012).

University Social Responsibility has assumed a multiplicity of meanings across university systems with the focus of operation and intervention differing significantly. A key definitional element has been the commitment to of universities to communities through a broad variety of forms of intervention such as service learning, outreach, socioeconomic development projects, social services, environmental commitment and knowledge production (Kouatli, 2019). In addition to sustainable development goals, USR seeks also to foster civic citizenship and an awareness of and respect for human rights and the rule of law as pillars of the extended functions of a socially responsible university. There is a further link to the idea of ‘engaged scholarship’ which has been defined as a type of engagement of university faculty in which linkage is created between the knowledge and ideas of a university as a knowledge producing organization and the use of the knowledge outputs to address the diverse development needs and aspirations of a community (Holland, 2005).

While knowledge about community engagement and university social responsibility has accumulated elsewhere, there is limited research and understanding about university social responsibility in African higher education contexts (Baptiste, Cai, Islam, & Wenceslas, (2022). In the context of developing countries in general and African nations in particular, the idea of community engagement has resonance for valid reasons, however. African communities need scientific direction and mass education to raise the level of peoples’ control over their lives. Thus, the role of students, faculty and researchers in making contributions to meet the felt needs of local communities is significant (Preece, 2013; Preece, et al 2012; Lazarus, 2008). Such a civic mission, though very relevant in the context of Africa’s socioeconomic and political gaps, has nonetheless been inadequately investigated.

Since the countries and regions of Africa have different political and economic as well as historical contexts it is important to understand how these contexts impact the operation of the third mission. For instance, the history of South Africa means that its universities can resemble those of northern Europe in terms of standards - which may include standards of community engagement (Cloete & Maassen 2015). North Africa, with some of the oldest universities on the continent, can be different in many ways from sub-Saharan Africa, both historically and socio-economically, which may again explain university social responsibility policies and practices. (Buckner, 2018). Many countries in west Africa have much in common and their higher education tradition can be different from those of east Africa

(Nwauwa, 2020). Country-level differences may also have implications. In Ethiopia, for instance, the system of higher education was guided by Marxist–Leninist philosophy and the ideology was reflected in all university missions and associated activities (Gemechu, 2024).

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

A review of the global literature shows that the broad area of corporate social responsibility has pertinently been conceptualized as the engagement of higher education in community development (Bernardo, Butcher, & Howard, 2012). A key element has been the idea of engagement as related to the context and aspiration of universities (Miahkykh, 2023). It has been argued that engagement is a symbiotic link between a university and its stakeholders. On the one hand, the university utilizes its knowledge and resources to advance science and technology and so raise the life standards of communities (Ramachandra et al 2014). On the other, the university may enrich its own research and scholarship levels and quality when it produces skilled and competent citizens that can address community aspirations for better lives and freedoms (Bloomfield, 2005). Engagement comes in many modes. According to Amorim et al (2017), universities may autonomously decide on the type and level of their engagement and involvement in USR in pursuit of their own aspirations and philosophies. Benefits to the university may include reputational gains, perceived impacts on the alleviation of societal problems, a widened societal understanding of the value of university research, an increased desire of community organizations to cooperate with the university, and generally a demonstration of the value of universities to society. Reiser (2008) argues that USR is a venture by a university to make its presence felt as an institution with an ethical mission to produce a positive effect on society through the varied contributions of its scientists and students beyond their more regular routines of research and teaching. Esfijani et al (2013) further extend the ideas of social responsibility as an outcome of an integrated strategic management of all core operations including outreach, which makes the university socially more relevant. The publics that universities address include internal and external stakeholders - businesses, NGOs, high schools, other universities, local communities, community leaders, advocacy groups, and alumni (Dima et al 2013).

Although considered the “third” mission, University Social Responsibility is believed to be no less important than the missions of teaching and research. However, despite the lofty ideals of the third mission, the conceptualization, operationalization and accomplishment of the

community engagement function is the least well-defined across university systems in Africa (Ogunode and Omenuko 2021; Walters and Openjuru, 2014). The strategic management of USR is also a subject of criticism, as many universities that have embraced the function and institutionalized it have not treated the subject as strategically important but as a reactive or ad hoc set of activities for “impression management”. Evidence of the marginalization of community engagement shows that it is often confined to service learning which universities find easier to implement and monitor (Mudau, 2023). The allocation of insufficient resources may also be taken as evidence of the lack of full commitment to the third mission. The lack of consensus on what constitutes community engagement has resulted in definitional problems and targeted interventions as community engagement is many things to many universities depending on contextual factors including leadership philosophy.

The idea of community engagement itself is contested as is the idea of the university itself both enabling and constraining any third mission (Green 2011). From the dismissive idea that community engagement is irrelevant to calls for “true” community service, the literature on the third mission, irrespective of its rhetorical force, has been characterized by anarchy (Bidandi, et al). The contestations in the engagement discourse have implications for third mission activities which can be both altruistic and self-serving. Incommensurate perspectives lead to disparate activities that include business outreach and income generation as opposed to public health promotion projects that lead to “thriving communities”. (Aguilar-Gaxiola, et al 2022)

As a result in part of the diversity of conceptions about community engagement, practices of measuring performance and more importantly impact have been few and far between and often illusory, unlike the measurement of teaching and research which is easier to do. Many companies have developed benchmarks for social responsibility delivery and outcomes yet many universities have lagged behind their corporate siblings (Patterson & Loomis, 2007). Notable exceptions include the University of Cape Town and Makerere University that have established not only clear strategic objectives but also yardsticks of performance (UC 2022; Makerere University 2022). In most other universities in Africa, except perhaps in South African higher education (Thomson, 2011), University Social Responsibility/community engagement is poorly defined and rarely measured.

Although there are perceptions of engagement being “unnecessary, unwanted and unproductive” (Pini & Mckenzie, 2006), the evidence seems to show that responsible universities have many positive impacts on society through their broad development aspirations and several studies have explored the positive outcomes of community engagement (Wigmore-Álvarez, & Ruiz-Lozano, 2012) (World Health Organization, 2017; O’Mara-Eves, et al 2015; Milton et al 2012; Attree, 2011). Studies have also examined the drivers and challenges of community engagement. Austerity measures leading to financial constraints in public universities may constrain the operationalization of community engagement by African universities such as the Pan-African University that has reported financial challenges having an impact on its mission (University World News, 2023). While a few African economies may be in good shape for third mission programs (Oketch, 2016), in many other African countries existing national economic challenges (Johnson, 2020) coupled with lack of political will (Poncian, 2019) or institutional commitment (Mugabi, 2015), may hamper community engagement programs (World Bank, 2010). The effect on the number of beneficiaries and quality of community engagement interventions may further be impacted by combined fiscal constraints and reduced donor commitments.

Elements of university social responsibility policy

A model of University Social Responsibility could be the community engagement policy of Wits University in South Africa from which other African universities may learn. The policy includes important details starting with a general introduction to the policy and its aims, a definition of community engagement, key concepts relating to community engagement, justification for a community engagement policy, a policy framework that includes international frameworks, and details on access to information, public participation in decision-making and access to justice in environmental matters. This is in addition to regional frameworks (centered on the Banjul Charter, and the African Charter on Popular Participation in Development and Transformation), and South Africa’s National frameworks including the South African Constitution and the country’s National Development Plan.

The policy document is clear in stating what the university as a service provider cares about in regard to various stakeholders and acknowledges the value of the stakeholders to the university as partners, emphasizing reciprocity and synergy. The policy also states that the

university advances the interests of the community as a collectivity while cherishing individual voices as being important to university. The policy further recognizes the possibility of informational shortfalls among its stakeholders and aspires that the university will address any informational asymmetry between the university and its partners.

Vision and mission statements

The formulation of a university's vision and mission statements has strategic goals as it can be used as a test of performance. Whereas a vision statement is aspirational in nature stating what the university hopes to be or accomplish in the future, a mission statement is more realistic providing a succinct description of the core functions of a university. An important feature of mission statements is that they express their relevance and commitment to their base of diverse stakeholders (Kosmützky and Krücken 2015). In the majority of cases, the mission statement reflects commitment to community engagement and in a few cases the community engagement division has its own vision and mission statements as illustrated by Fairfield University (Connecticut, USA). It says:

Our engagement with local and global partners is grounded in the Ignatian commitment to a faith that does justice for the betterment of communities and the creation of a more just and equitable world. We work in solidarity with institutions and organizations across the globe in the pursuit of equity and social and economic justice.

Websites and Community engagement

This study used university websites which are the principal channels which to project identity, mission, vision and publicize other institutional activities (Carnevale, 2005). The communication of mission, in particular, has significant relevance with regard to the university's third mission of community engagement (Arrazattee et al., 2013). Universities can be considered anchor institutions, well placed to articulate their commitment to community engagement as sources of scientific research, knowledge production, and institutions such as hospitals and other health research establishments that they can use to bring change to stakeholder communities. However, this need to use websites to articulate and demonstrate commitment to community engagement is not always clear (LePeau et al., 2018b), relevant institutional information may be inadequate or obsolete (LePeau et al., 2018a) and there is no way of knowing inputs and outcomes.

Theoretical framework

University Social responsibility has rich theoretical foundations in diverse domains as expounded in the broader conceptual literature on its business antecedent, Corporate Social Responsibility. Prime theoretical exposition comes from legitimacy theory which maintains that organizational survival requires responsiveness to a broad range of socioeconomic and political pressures. The response should come in the form of doing good to the community which provides the foundations for the organization's existence and sustainability. In practical terms, this requires responding to the myriad needs of surrounding communities and contributing to their betterment through a variety of mechanisms and interventions including literacy development in areas such as public health. Universities obtain legitimacy when they are community-oriented and add value to social justice enhancement and community improvement or demonstrate transformative impact (Bowen et al 2010). This role is particularly important in African contexts where communities are in dire need of assistance for life improvement.

The other theoretical framework for University Social Responsibility is open systems theory which postulates that entities need to enter in to and obtain the support of the immediate environment as a source of leverage (Kantabutra, 2022). The management of community engagement decides the extent and sustainability of a university's sustainability and outcomes on community engagement.

Research questions

1. Do the vision and mission statements of the selected universities have references to community engagement?
2. If so, how is community engagement presented in relation to teaching and research?
3. Is Social Responsibility institutionalized in the selected universities?
4. Do the study universities have full-fledged community engagement or University Social Responsibility policies? If so, how are the policies presented?

Methodology

Sampling was based on the exploratory goal of the study and the need to obtain insights into university social responsibility across the regions of Africa. A list of Africa's best universities would provide the sampling

frame, but such a list would be dominated by South African Universities, excluding many universities in other regions of Africa. Thus, based on Times Higher Education reputational rankings in reference to Southern and Western African universities (Stellenbosch University, University of Cape Town, University of Ibadan and University of Cape Coast) that were ranked among the top ten universities in Africa, universities with high reputational standing and attendant social responsibility objectives in Eastern Africa (Addis Ababa University from Ethiopia and Makerere University from Uganda) and North Africa (Alexandria University and American University of Cairo) were selected to have an Africa-wide sample.

The study focused on finding out whether the universities had clear references to community engagement or its equivalents in their vision and mission statements. It also explored whether any clear policies existed that advocated community engagement as well as strategies to be used to implement the policies. The study further investigated whether any mechanisms were used to measure community engagement either qualitatively, quantitatively or both. Once the universities were selected, text analysis applications were utilized to determine word count separately for Vision and Mission Statements as well as the total count. Applications were further used to identify references to community service, community engagement, civic service, service learning and other constructs that indicate the presence of the third mission presence.

Results

The primary question was whether the universities had mentions of University Social Responsibility or its conceptual equivalents. The websites showed that there is no reference to social responsibility or its variants (community engagement, outreach, community engagement and outreach, community service, civic engagement, citizen engagement, and so on) in the vision/mission statements of the universities studied with the exception of Addis Ababa University where there is a reference to a variant of the above called “community service”. Most universities seem to focus on either teaching or research or both as their primary mission and fail to mention the issue of university social responsibility. However, there are indirect indications of commitment to university social responsibility. Thus, there are implicit discourses of a mission of providing “services responsive to dynamic national and global needs” (Makerere University), enriching and transforming “local, continental and global communities” (Stellenbosch University), grappling with the “key issues of our natural and social worlds”

(University of Cape Town), contributing to the “the transformation of society through creativity and innovation”(University of Ibadan), “the building of a modern human being and cultural rehabilitation “of the society and be able to assume leadership positions in all sectors” (Alexandria University), The vision statements are more sweeping and variously make reference to university social responsibility but are not emphatic about community engagement or its equivalent. The vision of the University of Ibadan includes being “a world-class institution for academic excellence geared towards “meeting societal needs”. Makerere university has the vision of being “a thought leader of knowledge generation for societal transformation and development). Stellenbosch University in South Africa advocates a vision to “advance knowledge in service of society”.

Table 1. Mission, vision statements reference to USR

No	University	Vision	Mission
1	Addis Ababa University	Addis Ababa University aspires to be ranked among the top ten pre-eminent African graduate and research universities in 2023	The Mission of Addis Ababa University is to produce competent graduates, provide need based community service and produce problem-solving research outputs through innovative and creative education, research and consultancy service to foster social and economic development of the country.
2	Makerere University	Makerere University is a thought leader of knowledge generation for societal transformation and development	Makerere University is committed to providing transformative and innovative teaching, learning, research and services responsive to dynamic national and global needs.
3	Stellenbosch University	Stellenbosch University will be Africa's leading research-intensive university, globally recognized as excellent, inclusive and innovative, where we advance knowledge in service of society	Stellenbosch University is a research-intensive university, where we attract outstanding students, employ talented staff and provide a world-class environment; a place connected to the world, while enriching and transforming local, continental and global communities.
4	University of Cape Town	Vision 2030 is the result of inclusive and transformative leadership at the University of Cape Town (UCT). It was developed to give expression to UCT's massive transformative purpose- "Unleash human potential to create a fair and just society"- in the core academic functions, the cross-cutting responsibilities of transformation and	UCT aspires to become a premier academic meeting point between South Africa, the rest of Africa and the world. Taking advantage of expanding global networks and our distinct vantage point in Africa, we are committed through innovative research and scholarship, to grapple with the key issues of our natural and

		social responsiveness, and the systems that support and sustain UCT's work.	social worlds. We aim to produce graduates whose qualifications are internationally recognised and locally applicable, underpinned by values of engaged citizenship and social justice.
5	University of Ibadan	To be a world-class institution for academic excellence geared towards meeting societal needs.	To expand the frontiers of knowledge through provision of excellent conditions for learning and research. To produce graduates who are worthy in character and sound judgement. To contribute to the transformation of society through creativity and innovation. To serve as a dynamic custodian of society's salutary values and thus sustain its integrity
6	University of Cape Coast	To be a University with worldwide acclaim that is strongly positioned for innovative teaching, research, outreach and professional development.	The University of Cape Coast is an equal opportunity University uniquely placed to provide quality education through the provision of comprehensive, liberal and professional programmes that challenge learners to be creative, innovative and responsible citizens.
7	Alexandria University	Alexandria University aspires to restore the historic status of Alexandria University and to achieve a comprehensive qualitative leap in various fields of knowledge within a framework of noble human values, enabling to take a leading position in its national Arab, African, Mediterranean and global environments.	The University of Alexandria is a national, educational, research, and development institution integrated into the production and dissemination of knowledge. The university also emphasizes the building of a modern human being and cultural rehabilitation of the society and the ability to assume leadership positions in all sectors.
8	American University of Cairo	SMIE will be recognized throughout the University community as well as in Egypt, the region and internationally for its leadership and innovation in planning, assessment, research and for the quality of its work.	Strategy Management and Institutional Effectiveness (SMIE) advances the mission and values of the American University in Cairo, by facilitating evidence-based decisions and a culture of assessment and integrated planning. SMIE is the University's official source of information about itself, its peers and its educational environment

While there is a direct or indirect reference to their mission being societally-oriented through their third mission of university social responsibility, as Table 2 seems to show, there is a policy vacuum in the sample of universities. That is, there is an absence of a full-fledged university policy on university

social responsibility while there are mentions of isolated tools of community engagement. On the other hand, Stellenbosch University, University of Cape Coast, Addis Ababa University, Cairo University, and American University of Cairo have established separate administrative structures to run community engagement.

Table 2: Typology of community engagement across universities

University	Engagement Term	Presence of coherent policy		Presence of strategy		Presence of administrative unit for function	
		present	absent	present	absent	present	absent
Univ. of Cape Town	Community engagement		√		√		√
Stellenbosch University	Community engagement		√		√	√	
Lagos University	Community engagement		√		√		√
Univ. of Cape Coast	Community engagement		√		√	Industry and Innovation Unit	
Makerere university	Community engagement		√		√	√	
Addis Ababa University	Community Services		√	# but in need of modification		Vice President for Research and Technology Transfer	
Alexandria University	Community Service and Environmental Development		√		√	# led by president	
American Univ. of Cairo	Academic Community engagement		√		√	# led by director	

Discussion

Unlike many corporate entities with detailed corporate communication strategies, the studied universities do not seem to have strategies that broadly define their vision, mission, philosophy, values and their more specific relationships with their stakeholders and means of reaching them. Whilst there are statements of vision and mission, they are generic and do not give operational details of how these values are communicated (Steyn, 2000). However, communication should be at the center of strategy in university outreach or community service programs. It is important that universities clarify their relevant positions, articulate their mission for community engagement and draw interest to their engagement to mobilize broader community support (Arrazattee et al., 2013). The communication of community engagement does not appear adequately emphasized. The studied universities present a sharp contrast to other universities where the emphasis on community engagement has its own more focused vision and mission, and websites present news of community engagement activities. An example would be Brock University (Brock University 2022) which articulates its vision, mission and goals for community engagement as follows:

Community Engagement Vision, Mission and Goals

Brock is firmly committed to being an important part of its community and encourages community engagement across all aspects of its operation. We see Community Engagement as the collaboration between institutions of higher education and broader communities for the mutual exchange of knowledge and resources. These efforts are carried out in a spirit of partnership, inclusiveness and reciprocity, with the objective of contributing to the community's sustainable economic, social, environmental and cultural prosperity.

Another good practice example comes from the University of California at Riverside, which ambitiously clarifies its relevance not only nationally but even globally (RCEC 2020).

Vision of Community Engagement for the University of California (Riverside)

Riverside aspires to be an institution that has a solid partnership with its communities by engaging them – regionally, statewide, nationally and internationally – utilizing the knowledge, creativity and

commitment of its students, faculty, staff and alumni to support a better quality of life.

Such messaging also includes an attendant strategic plan for community engagement; puts universities in the spotlight and adds to their credibility and raises their profile as community-oriented universities (Hollander et al., 2002). If universities take university social responsibility, then they have to articulate their commitment in their vision and mission statements including their operations and programs. In this study, the only prominently shared feature among the universities is a lack of emphasis on community engagement or its alternative functions. Despite the greater relevance of university social responsibility to developing countries as in Africa where poverty reduction should be an important third mission function, many Northern Universities seem to have communicated their social responsibility mission with greater articulation in places, even aiming at global agendas of poverty elimination beyond their immediate communities as the Declaration on University Global Engagement would show (APLU, 2024).

This study points to the need to close the policy gap in respect of USR in Africa through enhanced effort to devise policies or, where they exist, to publicize them, and to ensure they are accompanied by strategic, regulatory, programmatic and evaluative details (Pellegrini, & Vivanet, 2021). As the community engagement policy literature shows, a few African universities such as the University of Pretoria may be cited as examples with community engagement policies (University of Pretoria, 2022). More generally, South African universities have a distinctive focus on community engagement as a national higher education mission linked to the country's White Paper on the role of higher education in national transformation (South Africa. Department of Education (1997).

The policy gap noted in the present study regarding university social responsibility is a contrast to the relevant policies of corporate social responsibility formulated by corporate actors which so many universities have taken as models. The awareness of need for policy communication seems a further issue that needs to be tackled. In other words, universities need to communicate their social responsibility policies clearly and fully so that a public audit of their policy commitments is possible and stakeholders can transparently weigh the promises and the actual implementation of these promises.

Like South African Universities that have articulated the need for fostering partnerships with government, civil society actors, and corporate entities, other African universities need to develop proactive USR policies through the selection of desired objectives, the mechanisms to realize the objectives, the formulation of specific USR programs, and audits of performance in USR. These policies need to consider a variety of important factors including national and international contexts, donor environment, and political factors including international treaties and declarations to which the country is a signatory (Ball, 1993). This study finds that the integration of USR into university strategies and practices into management, teaching, research, services, and public activities is limited.

There is a need for an institutionalization of community engagement as some of the studied universities lack a separate division dedicated to the operation and management of community service. While department or faculty level structures may be difficult to set up, universities need to have an institution dedicated to community engagement with allocated budgets and human resources to successfully carry out the important mission of serving communities at the university level, and with a capacity to counter any charges of managerialism (Klikauer, 2023). The need for a specific organizational unit to handle community engagement is justified by the multiplicity and diversity of tasks that require particular focus and efficient handling (Kiplimo, 2023; Isomura, & Isomura, 2021). The status of a university (national, local) as well as the size of its network of collaborations (local, regional/provincial, and national, international) may dictate the need for a specialized body that organizes, manages, controls and supervises the myriad of activities under community engagement.

Conclusion

Whilst Southern Africa universities seem to be the closest to embracing the idea of community engagement, and although they take it as an important function, the present study shows that they differ in their level of adoption, assignment of importance as a function, and the formulation of clear community engagement policies and strategies. Universities naturally differ in perspective (Benneworth, & Humphrey, 2012). The two universities of South Africa included in this study do not have fully fledged policies of community engagement while other South African universities such as the University of Pretoria do. When USR is seen as an extension of the teaching and research and not as a core function, it must be concluded that USR is in its infancy across the majority of Africa universities. Efforts seem to be

driven by social desirability and publicity concerns as the USR contribution continues to much lag behind the traditional functions of teaching and research (Bender, 2008) and as such continues to be considered the “stepchild” of higher education (Johnson, 2020). The present study confirms the observation that whatever USR programs are present appear to be reactive acts, obscure, and limited in terms of impact (Hall, 2010).

The rhetoric of community engagement in African higher education seems to be at odds with the call for increased relevance and authentic engagement of universities as partners in the resolution of ‘our most pressing social, civic and ethical problems’ (Boyer, 1996b, 32). The community engagement responsibility of Africa universities should be larger considering the continent’s level of development and the key role that these scientific institutions are assigned as partners in the socioeconomic transformation of Africa.

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